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ABSTRACT

The Socorro Independent School District is one of the fastest growing districts in Texas. In response to the complex issue of a rapidly growing and increasingly diverse student population, poverty, and shrinking pool of educational leader candidates, the district launched an Assistant Principals Academy, designed to prepare individuals to step more effectively into the role of principal within the next 2 or 3 years. Its objectives are to enable participating assistant principals to assess their individual beliefs, practices, strengths, and weaknesses with regards to long-term personal and professional goals as administrators, promote the value of continuing professional growth and development, assist campus leaders in acquiring new skills and practices, and provide the Socorro Independent School District with a talent pool of well-trained and confident school leaders. The academy offers a 2-year sequence of learning experiences for participants. Monthly sessions are based on the Learner-Centered Leadership Standards, adapted from those proposed for national adoption by the Interstate Leadership Licensure Consortium. Other school districts in the area are increasingly interested in participating in the program, and inquiries from other school systems around country are also starting to arrive with an indication of great interest in promoting local versions of the academy. (RT)

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BUILDING LEADERS FOR THE FUTURE:

THE SOCORRO INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT

ASSISTANT PRINCIPALS ACADEMY

by

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BUILDING LEADERS FOR THE FUTURE:

THE SOCORRO INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT

ASSISTANT PRINCIPALS ACADEMY

The Socorro, Texas, Independent School District is one of the fastest growing school districts in Texas, if not in the United States. In 1980, the district enrolled only 3,000 students in two buildings. In 2000, approximately 27,000 students were attending classes in 27 buildings. The school district adopted the practice of year-round schooling and, until this present school year, nade use of multiple tracking of students as a way to increase the use of individual school buildings while reducing overcrowding. By the year 2010, it is projected that the district will serve more than 50,000 students in more than 40 buildings. In addition to these characteristics, the school system serves a population where a high percentage of residents have incomes below national poverty levels. The majority of the district residents are Hispanic and have often recently migrated to the United States from Mexico or other Central American countries. Many students have limited proficiency in the English

language. Nevertheless, the Socorro Schools are above average with regard to their service to students. Four schools have recently been designated as National Blue Ribbon Schools, and all Socorro Schools perform at or above minimal achievement standards established by the Texas Education Agency (TEA) and measured annually by the Texas Academic Achievement Standards (TAAS) testing program.

To addition to local challenges such as poverty and rapid growth, Socorro also faces many issues common to an increasing number of schools across the United States. One of these will have a substantial impact on the ability of the district to continue to provide high quality educational programs for all students. Like many other school districts across the nation, it is increasingly difficult to find and retain educational leaders to serve as principals in the schools. Socorro and its neighboring district comprise the El Paso, Texas, metropolitan community. As is true of most other school systems in the country, all are experiencing a great need to identify capable and dedicated individuals who are willing to accept the increasingly complex challenges associated with leading public schools. As local school districts continue to grow, and as more experienced school principals choose to retire, the El Paso area and the entire nation face the task of recruiting, preparing, and retaining capable educational leaders. People must be prepared to serve as school administrators. Even more importantly, talented educators must be

convinced to even think about careers likely to be filled with stress, frustration, and demands made to ensure that schools effectively serve the needs of all students.

In 1998, the Socorro Independent School District began to move toward responding to this complex issue. With the assistance of consultant support provided by a faculty member from the neighboring University of Texas at El Paso, the school system launched an Assistant Principals Academy designed to prepare individuals to more effectively step into roles as principals within the next two or three years. Although not everyone participating in this program is necessarily guaranteed immediate placement in a principalship, the Academy is focused on the creation of a pool of individuals whose leadership skills have been refined in ways consistent with the demands placed on contemporary school principals.

Academy Objectives

The specific objectives of the Socorro Assistant Principals Academy are:

1. To enable participating assistant principals to assess their individual beliefs, practices, strengths, and weaknesses as these characteristics may be related to their long-term personal and professional goals as administrators in the school district.

2. To promote the value of continuing professional growth and development by participating assistant principals.
3. To assist campus leaders in acquiring new skills and practice that may be implemented for the improvement of practice in local schools throughout the district.
4. To enable participating assistants with skills and techniques that may be used to assist them in their individual searches for future positions as campus leaders.
5. To provide the Socorro Independent School District with a talent pool of well-trained and confident campus leaders who will be available to step into increasingly demanding administrative roles as the district continues to grow and work toward its goals of promoting quality educational experiences for all children.

Academy Staff

The staff for the Academy consists of three individuals. One is an Area Executive Director from the Socorro Central Office. His normal duties consist of working with the administrative and teaching staffs of one of the current high school feeder patterns in the district. This consists of a high school, two middle schools, and six elementary schools. The Area Executive Director has had more than ten years of successful administrative experience, including five years as the principal of a National Blue Ribbon middle school.

The second member of the Academy teaching team is a retired superintendent of the Socorro Schools. He has had more than twenty-five years of successful administrative experience as a superintendent, director of elementary education in a large urban district, principal, and assistant principal.

The third member of the staff is a professor of Educational Leadership at a local university. This individual, a former public school practitioner, has spent much of his time during the past twenty years working with school districts, state education agencies, universities, and other educational agencies to design and implement professional development programs designed to assist school leaders across the United States and in several international settings. He has carried out a considerable amount of research in the field, and is widely published.

Additional resource people and educational speakers from the region are also included in the monthly meetings of the Academy. For example, as "graduates" of the Academy are selected for principalships, they are typically invited to return to the group and describe their experiences in terms of "Life After the Assistant Principalship." In another case, a district principal who has been responsible for opening two new schools in four years has been invited to address the Academy on issues that will face principals in similar

situations. Given the rapid growth of the district, these experiences and insights are viewed as relevant issues to be shared with current assistants.

Expectations for Participants

Academy sessions are scheduled to last approximately two and one-half hours and are held once each month from September to May. The Academy is designed to provide sessions with new material and foci for a cycle of two consecutive years.

During the first two years of the program, assistant principals within the Socorro district were not required to attend any sessions. This voluntary participation created a number of problems because the facilitators never knew who would attend from session to session. Further, it made systematic planning of content and activities for each session quite difficult. While the facilitators wanted to avoid the imposition of too rigid a structure, it became clear that some changes needed to be made so that Academy sessions did not simply become opportunities for participants to gather each month for undirected conversations, griping, and gossip.

The structure of the program was changed significantly for the third year. The facilitators met with the district superintendent to develop a plan wherein all district assistant principal could attend the monthly sessions if they wished, but attendance would be mandatory for all assistant principals who had less than three years of experience as administrators in the district. This

decision was reached in light of the fact that the district board policy requires at least three years of successful campus-based leadership experience (either in Socorro or any other school district) before anyone would be appointed to a principalship. To enable this mandated attendance, the facilitators also changed the format of the monthly Academy meetings. For the first two years, sessions were held on weekday mornings with the belief that this would underscore the importance of the program by making the Academy equivalent to other duties that might ordinarily involve assistants in their schools. Unfortunately, the real demands on assistants was such that their duties at school during the regular school day often were much more demanding on the assistants (and their principals). As a result, beginning with the third year of the Academy, all sessions were held at 4:30 in the afternoon. In addition, Wednesday afternoons were selected as the regular meeting day because the district calendar included a significantly fewer number of normal after-school activities with which assistant principals might be involved throughout the school year.

Attendance at the monthly sessions was expected of all assistant principals with three or fewer years of experience during the third year of the Academy. However, situations at individual schools arose at times that required several individuals to either come quite late for Academy sessions, or miss them entirely. During the fourth year of the program, attendance is

still expected, but instead of demanding participation in cases where it became almost impossible, the facilitators now are noting the number of clock hours of participation by each assistant principal. Before an assistant principal "completes" mandatory involvement in the Academy, he or she will be expected to engage in no fewer than 40 total hours of attendance at sessions. This may be completed in two years of regular attendance, or it can require participation in a third year in some cases.

The facilitators realize that involvement in Academy sessions is an additional task required of assistant principals, beyond the demands placed on them each day in their schools. As a result, required work outside of the sessions is kept to a minimum. However, two requirements are explained to all assistant principals at the beginning of each year. First, each person is expected to read at least three books, of individual choice and dealing with educational issues. Numerous suggestions are made by the facilitators, and copies of a limited number of books are made available at no cost to Academy members. However, assistants are able to select additional material to read and report to their colleagues at different times during the school year. The second required activity of each participating assistant principal involves the preparation of an individual educational platform to describe personal beliefs and values related to the roles and responsibilities of educational leaders. This is a critical activity that the facilitators believe is one of the most

important parts of the entire Academy experience. There is a strong commitment to the notion that leadership of organizations must begin with a person's ability to recognize direction from within. As a result, a considerable amount of discussion takes place throughout all meetings of the Academy each year regarding the ways in which personalized perspectives have a great deal to do with how one makes critical decisions and behaves as a leader in schools.

Leadership Themes and Academy Content

The Academy is designed to provide participants with content, skills, and insights that they may use in personal preparation for a successful career as a campus leader. Imbedded within all activities is a constant reminder to assistant principals that, if they are to succeed eventually as principals, they must be constantly aware of the ways in which they can enhance their individual professional "portfolios" of skills and insights that they may use when they reach a new level in their administrative careers. An assumption made at the outset of the creation of the Academy was that assistant principals can often become "typecast" as administrators who are able to do only a limited range of administrative tasks. For example, people often become quite skilled at working with discipline almost exclusively, or student activities, or special education, and so forth. All of these are certainly part of the world of school principals, but principals (and aspiring principals) are also

responsible for the full range of activities and programs in their schools, from student discipline to testing to working with community groups and so forth. Academy participants are constantly challenged to remember this fact as they fine-tune the work that they now encounter as assistant principals.

Meetings of the Academy include the presentation of material by the staff and other invited resource people, opportunities for discussion about local as well as national and international educational issues, readings, and participation in activities directed toward the needs of individuals in the earliest stages of their professional administrative careers.

The Academy has been planned to offer a two-year sequence of learning experiences for participants. During that time, the organizing theme for each monthly session is the "Formation of Learning-Centered Leaders for the Socorro Independent School District." As a result, the *Learner-Centered Leadership Standards* adopted by the Texas Education Agency (TEA) and the State Board for Educator Certification serve as the basis for sessions. These have been adopted from the standards proposed for national adoption by the Interstate Leadership Licensure Consortium (ISLLC). The following are the *Learner-Centered Standards* for Texas:

1. ***Learner-Centered Values and Ethics of Leadership***. A principal is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by acting with integrity and fairness, and in an ethical manner.

2. ***Learner-Centered Leadership and Campus Culture.*** A principal is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students and shapes campus culture by facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a vision of learning that is shared and supported by the school community.
3. ***Learner-Centered Human Resources Leadership Management.*** A principal is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by implementing a staff evaluation and development system to improve the performance of all staff members, selects and implements appropriate models of supervision and staff development, and applies the legal requirements for personnel management.
4. ***Learner-Centered Communications and Community Relations.*** A principal is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by collaborating with families and community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilizing community resources.
5. ***Learner-Centered Organizational Leadership and Management.*** A principal is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students through leadership and management of the

organization, operations, and resources for a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment.

6. ***Learner-Centered Curriculum Planning and Development***. A principal is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by facilitating the design and implementation of curricula and strategic plans that enhance teaching and learning; alignment of curriculum, curriculum resources and assessment; and the use of various forms of assessment to measure student performance.
7. ***Learner-Centered Instructional Leadership and Management.*** A principal is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by advocating, nurturing, and sustaining a campus culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth.

Other topics of immediate concern are also used to guide meetings. For example, in one session during the third year of the Academy, the assistant principals at one high school revealed a problem that they had encountered with student use of school computers. Like many other technology issues facing school districts across the nation, little established policy was available for review by the administrators responsible for dealing with the problem. The resulting discussion about this matter served as the basis for a substantial amount of time during one monthly meeting.

Another session is devoted to providing assistant principals with time to practice interviewing skills that will be needed when they apply for principalships. Typical interview questions from school systems across the nation are distributed to participants who volunteer to serve as either interviewers or candidates being interviewed. Sessions are videotaped to enable individuals to review their ability to be effective respondents. Also, after each mock interview, all participants, including the Academy staff, immediately critique the performance of the person going through the interview process. Assistant principals have indicated that this individual session has been exceptionally useful to them when they have gone for real principal interviews in local schools in Socorro or in surrounding school districts.

Evaluation of the Academy

Evaluation of the effectiveness of the Academy to date has been in the form of gathering comments from participants at the conclusion of each year of the program. In every year, these comments have led to changes being made in the structure and activities of the Academy for the following year. As noted earlier, for example, participant comments regarding the first two years of the Academy led the staff to change the program for one offered during the regular school day to one held after school hours. Also, based on input from participants, the third Academy adopted a much stronger structure, led in

large measure by reliance on the Learner-Centered Leadership Standards described above.

As the fourth edition of the Academy is being planned, the staff has again sought input and suggestions for improvement from the assistant principals to guide the modifications made for 2001-2002. Among the issues that will be addressed this next year are the following recommendations:

- Provide more time during monthly sessions to allow assistants to present information that they have learned through other sources (readings, inservice meetings, workshops, statewide committees, etc.) to their colleagues.
- Enable group members more time to get to know their colleagues better as individuals. As the district continues to grow in size, it is increasingly probable that people no longer do not know many administrative colleagues. The Academy should be a time when people get to know others.
- Provide time for assistants to share any critical incidents or issues that they are facing in their individual schools. Again, an example of this was the discussion held after the discovery of the problems facing supervision of school computers at one school.
- Although the primary thrust of the Academy should remain on broader considerations of leadership issues, not management

detail, some time should be allocated to occasional talk about more concrete aspects of administration, such as budgeting, personnel management, and so forth.

- Although the ultimate decision to allow it to occur would rest with principals in individual schools, assistant would like the opportunity to "swap" schools for a day now and then with others in the group. This would be a way to enable secondary school assistants to learn about issues in elementary schools and so forth.
- Time invested in the Academy sessions should be counted as continuing education credit hours now required by the state of Texas for license renewal. (This suggestion has already been acted upon, and participants in last year's Academy have already received appropriate credit).
- Meetings should be held in different schools around the district rather than always at the Educational Center Board Room.

In general, a strong theme emerging from these and other suggestions was that the group believed that they would like to assume increasing control over the content of individual sessions as well as the program itself. This is a most welcome development from the perspective of the staff who have insisted from the outset that the Academy should eventually evolve into something that assistants are involved with creating and operating more and

more. As is true of any adult learning activity, greater success will always occur in settings where adults take increasing responsibility for their own learning. The Assistant Principals Academy in Socorro is heading in a very positive direction in that regard.

Final Reflection

The Socorro Independent School District Assistant Principal Academy began three years ago with some informal discussions among the superintendent, a few principals in the district, and a university professor. At first, little more than a general vision of what the Academy "could be" guided its work. Now, in a relatively short period of time, the Academy is becoming a regular and seriously accepted part of the professional development cycle for leaders in the system. Other school districts in the area are increasingly interested in participating in the program. During this next year, for example, at least one smaller neighboring school district will "send" assistant principals to join the Socorro group. Inquiries from other school systems around the country are also starting to arrive with an indication of great interest in promoting local versions of the Academy.

It is a simple notion—to bring together administrators who are rarely the subject of special training, and provide them with an environment for learning. Comments gathered over each year have indicated that this may be the one aspect of the Academy that is most prized by participants, namely the

opportunity "for us to get together and talk about our unique concerns." It is in this type of increasing collegial dialogue and growth that a very good school district like Socorro is likely to ensure its focus on excellence in the future. Commitment to effective administrator development is a way to ensure that the Board of Trustees and the district will have a ready supply of strong and effective school leaders to accept the challenges that are sure to follow growth and expansion.

One last reflection is in order. The Socorro Assistant Principals Academy has been accepted locally as a successful activity. But like any other effort of its type, it must be understood from a much larger perspective. It was given a chance to become a useful tool in developing local school leadership because it is derived from a solid vision of leadership by key decision makers in the district. Without an effective and dedicated superintendent working effectively with a board of education that is truly dedicated to improvement and excellence, the Academy would be like many other "good ideas" that never appear in education. The Socorro district appreciates the fact that it will continue to be effective only with effective teachers and administrators. For years, the district has devoted resources to a Teacher Academy and a comprehensive program of staff development and inservice opportunities for all who work in the system. The Assistant Principals Academy is an extension of that same belief system and vision.

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